

**CULTURAL  
WORKERS  
BULLETIN**

# Arts & labour

## **Strike at the Barbican Centre: A Report from a Casual Worker**

City of London GMB announced industrial action on the 25th of May 2023. 77% of members voted yes to strike action following consultative ballots and the rejection of a 3% pay offer for contracted staff. This is a real time pay decrease in recognition of the recent inflation rate of 10.1%. (March 2023)

Casual workers at the Barbican Centre, City of London are currently not part of the 'bargaining unit' within GMB City of London and were not able to vote in the ballots. They are not considered part of the 'striking workforce' and would not receive strike pay from GMB either. GMB is however encouraging the casual workforce to join the picket line on the day but there are concerns that any actions might have a fundamental impact on future consideration for shifts by management. There are conversations about organising a 'wildcat' strike and funding a pot for those who cannot afford to lose the hours.

As the most precarious yet powerful workforce, casual staff at the Barbican believe that a presence on the picket line is essential and it may be an opportunity to make demands for issues that we have been fighting for collectively in recent times, such as, sick pay, a cost-of-living crisis payment package, and contracts for those who need regular hours. There have been conversations about taking collective actions, as individuals may be scrutinised for participation in strike action.

Recently, the casual workers have collectively presented a letter to the City with 188 signatures regarding our exclusion from the cost-of-living support

payments by the City of London. Contracted workers at the centre received £1000 in December and are due to receive another payment in July. Meanwhile casual workers working throughout the pandemic, without sick pay etc., were not included in this scheme. There were times during that period when the Barbican was quiet, work was scarce and many of the casual staff had to make difficult decisions between heating homes and buying food. Casual workers feel that they have been hit the hardest by the cost-of-living crisis and need that crucial support. With the recent announcements of National Portfolio Organisations (NPO) funding from the Art Council England, many institutions have had to face brutal cuts within the sector. The casual staff are first to experience reduced working hours, as institutions become more concerned about the cost of heating bills.

The timing of the collective letter and strike action might be a chance to build momentum and organise the casual workforce at the Centre and become a part of the 'bargaining unit'. Among us we are thinking about whether it will be more disruptive to call in sick on the day or to just join the picket line instead of going to work, to show that we are clearly on strike. This means that the Centre will not have the extra time to sort out agency staff from its usual vendor, 'Artisan People'. About the day of the strike action, the CEO has put out a statement to say that it will continue with events and that employees should respect others' opinions. This is clearly aimed at creating a dynamic of individualism which might lead to scabbing.

**Support Barbican Casuals to take strike action:**  
<https://www.gofundme.com/f/barbican-casuals>

## 'Attrition' at Whitechapel Gallery

Attrition is not the name of an upcoming show at the Whitechapel Gallery, it's the term that senior management have used to describe their strategy for mitigating redundancies amongst its visitor services (front of house) team. Since starting in late 2023, new directorship Gilane Tawadros and Tom Wilcox, have pursued a ruthless course of cuts to the gallery's staffing under the premise of balancing a deficit. Six high-profile redundancies and a spate of voluntary resignations early in the year have been followed by £70,000 in cuts to the visitor services department - equivalent to the axing of a further 5-6 staff jobs.

Whitechapel Gallery (est. 1901) did not have a recognised union presence until Feb 2021, when a bid for statutory recognition, officially initiated with the employer and the Central Arbitration Committee in July 2020, was finally granted. Through successful campaigning and negotiations, April 2022 saw Front of House staff awarded the London Living Wage (a 13.5% pay rise), plus new annualised fixed-term contracts to replace some of the crappy three-and-a-half-month ones that had previously been the norm. Although back of house staff did not win much last year - having asked for updated salary banding and receiving nothing of the sort - there was optimism about the front of house wins and that a new director would make improvements. This hope turned out to be catastrophically misplaced.

Gilane and Tom staggered their attacks on different departments across the first half of 2023. Redundancies in fundraising and curatorial teams were first. These were linked to Gilane's new 'strategic vision', which involved the cancellation of multiple shows largely arranged by WG's now-outgoing staff, and the establishment of a new 'ethics advisory board'. A planned Summer exhibition of South African art was dropped, in part because one of its core external partners was deemed unsuitable by the new board. Meanwhile, the Zabudowicz Trust - an organisation subject to a widely publicised international boycott - seems to have passed the new advisory board's due diligence check. The gallery's new ethics board and a dubious financial self-assessment (WG's deficit is in fact broadly comparable with other similar organisations) seem to have provided cover for cancelling the shows and contracts of long-standing members of staff.

For other departments the timeline was different. By March 2023, half of the annualised front of house contracts won in 2022 had been quietly not renewed. By April it was clear that the plan was for annualised contracts to be completely phased out. This is due to a new exhibition programme that purportedly requires fewer invigilators, coming into effect without warning

at the start of May with plans to formalise the move in June.

Separate pay negotiations around this time also determined that this year's London Living Wage rise was not to be backdated, meaning that for the six months since October, staff were paid less than LLW. Additionally, senior management committed to only ever adjusting wages in April, regardless of when LLW increases the rate. Within the LLW scheme this is still technically permissible - which needs to be taken up with those from LLW Foundation.

In effect the 2023 offer broadly comes in as: a commitment to not receiving a living wage for part of the year, casualisation, a net reduction in available hours, the vague promise of a return to short fixed-term contracts that the past years had been spent organising to scrap. Inflationary pay rises ranged from: LLW uplift for invigilators, 8% for <30k, 5% for 30-40k, 3% for 40-50k. Though even with this our pay remains comparatively low for the sector. In other departments, additional responsibilities have been added to jobs with no corresponding pay increase, (salary banding remains a key issue).

Strike action has been discussed at branch meetings since February, and we are aware that the grand opening of Gilane's new show is a particularly sensitive time for the gallery's updated image. Letting conditions deteriorate so that many staff consider leaving to find a less hostile employer is part of the 'attrition' programme. Some slightly more generous pay deals and improved job security were offered to some remaining back of house staff, and internal promotion opportunities (opening up largely as a result of the staff cull/exodus) have been presented as an individual way out of the shit for a few - though external hiring for these roles has caused much upset and indicated that the overall management strategy has been to attack conditions and hire in new people on worse terms than their predecessors.

Negotiations about contract changes are still ongoing as we try to save about half of the annualised contracts, the pay deal received a 34% reject vote on a 77% turnout so the matter is not neatly settled, freelancers say they haven't had a pay increase this year and that WG is one of the capital's lowest paying galleries, a letter addressed to trustees and signed by the gallery's supporters and past employees called for 'immediate action' to address concerns about 'the financial rationale' behind the job cuts. The upcoming exhibition, opening June 8th is titled, 'Life is More Important than Art'.

# EXTEND SOLIDARITY TO THE PALESTINIAN STRUGGLE FOR DECOLONISATION, AND TAKE PART IN THE BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT AND SANCTIONS MOVEMENT.

## Arts Workers for Palestine, Scotland – Statement

We are Arts Workers for Palestine, Scotland. We are a group dedicated to supporting the Palestinian people's call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign against apartheid Israel. We are calling for arts and cultural spaces across Scotland to demonstrate solidarity with the Palestinian people, and make a distinct, uncompromised, and principled stance against the ongoing apartheid regime as enforced by the state of Israel in Palestine.

We are intervening in a culture wherein it is acceptable for arts organisations to aestheticise a radical politic of decolonization and use it to gloss over their tacit contributions to systematised violence and imperialism. People are drawn to art because of its liberatory power, and arts and cultural institutions which have varying degrees of complicity with apartheid are cynically failing their audiences, workers and artists.

All across Palestine Israel's brutal settler-colonialism continues to murder, dispossess and humiliate Palestinians. Arts workers and organisations in Scotland need to raise their voices in solidarity with this suffering and in support of the Palestinian resistance. We want to highlight the difficulties Palestinian artists and cultural workers face and the consequence this has on production and expression of their art. We hope to create a movement across the arts sector in Scotland in support of Palestine and aim to build alliances with Scottish arts organisations to achieve this.

For more information:

Open letter: <https://openletter.earth/arts-workers-for-palestine-scotland-statement-05a21f35>

Email: [Glasgowartistsforpalestine@gmail.com](mailto:Glasgowartistsforpalestine@gmail.com)

BDS: <https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds>

## Repair Collective x UAL: End Outsourcing - 'Back In-House' Film Screening

Ahead of strikes, and the opening of University of the Arts London College of Fashion's Stratford Campus in June, Repair Collective presents a film screening of *'Back In-House'*, a short film directed by Sean McSweyn. The film explores experiences of UAL cleaners, and stands in solidarity with their fight to be employed back "in-house". Supporting the themes explored in *'Cleaning in Progress'*, an audio installation by Repair Collective artist, Phoebe Wagner, this event supports the campaign and gives greater detail on the experiences of cleaners locally.

Date and Time: Sat, 27 May 2023 13:30

Location: 50 Celebration Ave 50 Celebration Avenue  
London E20 1DB

Repair Collective      UAL: End Outsourcing

present

BACK IN HOUSE

An afternoon of film and discussion between cleaners, artists and activists

to stand in solidarity with the UAL cleaners fight against outsourced contracts, and for stabilised employment.

**When and Where?**

Sat, 27 May 2023 13:30 - 15:30

@ Hypha Studios  
50 Celebration Avenue  
London E20 1DB

Tickets are free on Eventbrite

## PCS Culture Group: Strike Update

Since a successful ballot was held in autumn 2022, there have been national one day strikes called by PCS on the 1st Feb, 15th March and 28th April 2023. These dates included a mixture of our branches, including the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), UK Sport Councils/Sport England, the Wallace Collection, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, National Museums Liverpool and the National Library of Wales. In Scotland culture workers at the National Museum of Scotland and the National Galleries of Scotland also took part. This is the first time since the 2011 Pension reform strikes that multiple branches of the PCS Culture Group have struck on the same days.

Two branches voted to use the national ballot as a springboard for sustained local strikes. At the British Museum members voted 2 weeks of strike action in March (over the busy Easter holiday), in addition to the 3 national days. They were repeatedly able to close the museum completely to visitors. This was achieved due to the membership density in the in-house security team, without whom the museum cannot open. This was, as far as we can tell, the only PCS workplace to shut entirely to the public. For the Group this is a huge achievement. Even during our headline strikes at the National Gallery in 2015 and the Tate Modern in 2020, our members were unable to completely stop the public from visiting the galleries.

Members at the British Library organised 2 weeks of strike action in April. They also used the national issue of low pay but placed an emphasis on resisting the bullying culture that management has ignored for many years to motivate members to join the picket lines.

The way the various 30+ departments, funding bodies and institutions which constitute the PCS Culture Group are funded is a barrier to not only sectoral bargaining but also to coordinated national action. PCS branches are structured in groups which generally correspond to a government department. The largest of these, DWP and HMRC engage in departmental bargaining on pay and working conditions. Because of the devolved and arms-length funding of UK culture, the group is not able to bargain nationally, instead all bargaining is done in the workplace at over 30 separate bargaining units.

Whilst the PCS Culture Group covers the whole of the United Kingdom, the Full Time Officials for the Scottish and Wales branches conduct their bargaining at a regional level, which means on a practical level that the

lay Group Executive Committee (GEC) mostly coordinates branches in London and the other English regions.

This structure has good local benefits - members are empowered in their workplace and bargaining is not conducted by a committee which may not have any direct representation from branches - but it is a barrier to wider sectoral action as deals can be struck separately by employers eager to minimise disruption. Similarly, coordinated action between England, Wales and Scotland is hard to achieve because of the devolved structure of government which has been mirrored in the union's internal structures.

In recent weeks Prospect (who represent middle to higher bands/grades at many of the same workplaces across the civil service and in culture) have also called a national campaign of strikes. Sadly, there has yet to be any shared strike days between PCS and Prospect arranged either at the national or local level. This would be particularly helpful at the British Museum and British Library if it could be achieved, as both branches have been able to mobilise large attendances of over 100 people on multiple occasions at their separate pickets.

So far, the PCS national campaign has resulted in isolated gains for individual branches. But this is to be expected given the structural issues outlined above and should not be dismissed as in several cases represent large percentage pay increases. Recent increased pay offers at National Museums Liverpool and The Wallace Collection have been accepted by members. Workplaces that have not been balloted such as the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Southbank Centre have been given improved pay offers (including lump sum agreements), in what can be interpreted as these institutions attempting to head off attempts by branches to fold into a wider national campaign.

In the short to medium term, even with the recent announcement of Mark Serwotka's retirement, the NEC election victory for the ruling Left Unity faction means that PCS looks set to continue its national campaign in the same manner - one of national strike days and targeted local action. For the Culture Group this still presents the best opportunity for branches to strike together at the same time. The prospect of wholesale change to the current mixed and devolved funding regime for cultural organisations in the UK looks unlikely, even with a Labour party victory in 2024. Therefore, it is up for PCS Culture Group members in local branches to agitate for action and use the disaggregated ballot system to their advantage.